1993

A Quest for Religious Identity: Thai Women, Buddhism and the Modern State

Kimberly Anne Cooperrider
University of Redlands

"A Quest For Religious Identity: Thai Women, Buddhism and the Modern State"

Interdisciplinary Senior Honors Thesis

Kymm Cooperrider

Spring, 1993

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

The idea for this project originated during the fall semester of 1991, which I spent abroad in Thailand. The program I completed in Thailand required that I spend the last month on my own, researching a topic of my choice. Before I left the U.S., I knew I wanted my Independent Study Project to deal with issues affecting Thai women's lives in some way. It wasn't until I had been in Thailand for several weeks that I began wondering about the absence of women wearing the yellow robe of the monk. When I asked the program's Thai religion instructor why this was the case he told me that the order of Buddhist nuns had died out centuries ago in India and that without that unbroken lineage to the time of the Buddha, no new nuns could ever validly be ordained. I did not want to accept this explanation, and therefore spent my last month trying to find a satisfactory answer for why there are no nuns in Thailand.

After I returned home, I realized that I had not fully answered my question and that to do so I would have to ask other questions such as what effect has this phenomena had on women's lives and in turn how have they responded. This paper is the result of my ongoing effort to understand a very complex historical issue. I still do not feel that I have come up with all the answers I seek, but in completing this research I have learned how to ask more informed,

precise questions and to hypothesize about how things might have been.

"Buddhism has saved the daughter from indignity, elevated the wife to a position approximating to equality, and retrieved the widow from abject misery."

-Dr. L.S. Dewaraja

"It is evident that the liberation of women from patriarchy is the cause which religion is least able to encompass. Although religion has been able to respond to antiracism, antislavery, liberalism, socialism, and anticolonialism, it stops when it comes to the liberation of women."

-Rosemary Ruether

I. INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist monastic order, the *sangha*, was created in India by Gautama Buddha in the sixth century BCE as a wandering group of mendicants. The *sangha* was loosely organized, and admission into the order was informal.[1] Although the position of women was secondary to the position of men, women were guaranteed representation in all sectors of religious life. Followers of the Buddha's teachings were classified in four groups, *bhikkus* (monks), *bhikkunis* (nuns), *upasakas* (laymen), and *upasikas* (laywomen).

Today, 2500 years later, Buddhism no longer exists in India, its country of origin. In 247 BCE, the *sangha* split into two schools, the Mahayana and the Theravada. Theravada Buddhists, the more conservative group, exclusively followed the doctrine alleged to be the word of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhists accepted a more liberal interpretation of the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings), and added some Post-canonical sutras to their scriptures.[2] After the split, the two schools spread throughout Asia, coming to predominate in different areas. Today Mahayana Buddhism is a major religion in Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, and Bhutan. Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Cambodia, Laos, Sri

[1]See Etienne Lamotte, "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha," in The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 53-55.

[2]Buddist texts fall into two groups, the Canonical which were edited by the first Buddhist Council after Gotama's death, and the Post-canonical which were edited later.

Lanka, Burma, and Thailand.[3] Although Theravada Buddhists try to practice the Buddhism followed by the original converts of the Buddha, there are many differences between ancient Indian Buddhism and the modern Theravadin Buddhism of Southeast Asia. One difference, which will be the focal point of this paper, is that while the Buddha organized the Buddhist community into four *sanghas*, Theravadin countries only have three.[4] There are no officially recognized *bhikkunis* in any Theravadin country.[5] Ancient traditions are central to the Theravada Buddhist's spiritual existence. As Michael Carrithers explains,

> The Buddhism of ... Southeast Asia is the School of Elders, Theravada. 'School of the Elders' indeed: it would best be thought of as that school which, as Buddhism grew and expanded, continually inclined toward the conservative choice, the preservation of an archaic view of Doctrine and of the Order of monks, the Sangha. This view of the Doctrine is crystallized in the commentaries to the Canon, which were finally edited in Sri Lanka in the fifth century AD. These are devoted to rejecting change, to certifying the original sense of every word of the Buddha. In the same spirit, the Sangha is conceived as a fraternity observing, in the minutest detail, its original way of life as conducted under the Buddha.[6]

---

[3]Buddhists in Tibet follow a tradition that combines elements from Mahayana, Theravada, and tantric Buddhism. For more information see Per Kvaerne, "Tibet: The Rise and Fall of a Monastic Traditon," in The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).

[4]The word *sangha* can be used to describe any Buddhist community, or specifically to describe the Buddhist monastic community.

[5]There may be many Theravada Buddhist women living the lives of a *bhikkuni* without official recognition. One Thai woman, Voramai Kabilsingh, received the *bhikkuni* ordination in Taiwan and now lives in Thailand and calls herself a Thai *bhikkuni*. However, the Thai Monastic Council refuses to recognize her as a religious figure. She will be discussed later in the paper.

[6]Michael Carrithers, "'They will be Lords upon the Island': Buddhism in Sri Lanka," in The World of Buddhism, ed. by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 133.

Ironically, however, Theravada Buddhists fail to uphold the ancient tradition which calls for the establishment of four sectors of religious life.

Bhikkuni orders do flourish today in Mahayana Buddhist countries. Although there may be other factors that contributed to the varying opportunities for women in Mahayana and Theravada countries, the main factor seems to be an ideological difference between the two schools. Nancy Schuster Barnes describes the origin of the conflict between the two schools in this way:

> Originally no Buddhist doctrines asserted any difference between women's and men's religious capacities, aspirations, and accomplishments. But some time after the death of the Buddha, his followers began to speculate about the implications of his teaching. Then, some time after about 300 B.C.E. and before 200 C.E., a doctrinal crisis erupted wherein the spiritual capacities of women were challenged and a real effort was made to prove theologically that women are inferior to men. It was during this period that Mahayana Buddhism arose, and it was some early Mahayanists who become champions of equality against the adherents of some of the older Buddhist schools.[7]

What Barnes does not mention, is that along with the conflict about the spiritual capacities of women, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists were engaged in a struggle about the nature of the religion itself.

The most complete collection of material either about or attributed to Sakyamuni Buddha is contained in the Pali

---

[7]Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," in Women in World Religions, ed. by Arvind Sharma (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 114.

canon of Theravada Buddhism.[8] This is significant because it illustrates the basic conservatism of the Theravada school. Theravadin Buddhists acknowledge only 'canonical' writings, or those which are directly attributed to the Buddha. Mahayanan Buddhists, on the other hand, accept 'post-canonical' or 'pseudo-canonical' sutras. These sutras, written during the period when Buddhism was splitting into two schools, argue for the spiritual equality of women. More important, they suggest a willingness to challenge the canon; a willingness which is absent in Theravada Buddhism.

The Theravadin tradition which exists in Southeast Asia today is a highly bureaucratic religion. The *sanghas* are organized in strict hierarchies. In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism may properly be called the state religion. Approximately ninety six percent of Thai people call themselves Buddhists and the king is bound by law to be a practicing Buddhist, while still advocating religious freedom. However, opportunities for women within the religion are limited. There are no officially recognized *bhikkunis* in Thailand, and the majority of Thai Buddhists see no possibility for the ordination of *bhikkunis* in the future. Thai women interested in the renunciant's life can leave their homes and take the eight precepts of a *mae chi*

[8]Pali is a variation of the ancient Sanskrit, which was used for religious writing only. The first complete record of Buddhist scriptures was written and preserved in Pali. "The First Symbols of the Buddha," p 14.

(woman in white). However, *mae chis* - legally neither lay women or ordained religious figures - are looked upon as little more than beggars living on the charity of monks.

The intention of this paper is twofold, first to examine the effect of the bureaucratization of the Buddhist religion on women, and second to explore how the status of Thai women, specifically, has been affected by their exclusion from the *sangha*. The status of women in Theravadin Buddhist structures has gradually diminished as religion has become more closely aligned with the hierarchical organization of the state. This in turn has affected women's opportunities in secular society. Patriarchal values within the Thai culture may also have played a role, as evidenced by the effect of non-egalitarian social ideologies on the theoretically egalitarian religion. Religion and the state are so intertwined in Thailand today that it is very difficult to distinguish between the effects of each. Therefore I will attempt to show how Buddhism was influenced by the state, and how this relationship lowered the status of women both within and outside of the religion.

Section II details the status of women, both ordained and non-ordained, during the time of the origin of Buddhism. This section also describes the gradual codification of the religion after the creation of the *Sangha*. Section III consists of a description of the situation of religious women in Thailand today and the development of modern Thai bureaucracy. Section IV explores the various ways Asian

women are responding, both individually and in groups, to the low status of women in the Buddhist *Sangha*. The last section offers some comments about future work to be done in this area.

II. THE ORIGINS OF BUDDHISM

The *Sangha*, which existed during the life of the Buddha, was very different than the *Sangha* which exists today in Thailand. As originally prescribed, the monastic order the Buddha created was an order of devotees who renounced the world in order to follow the path illustrated by the Buddha's example and teachings. Although renunciants came into contact with lay followers as teachers of the *Dhamma*, their main purpose was to work towards an individual salvation. Monks and nuns did not fulfill the functions a priest might in a Christian country such as offering counsel or holding religious services for the community.[9] Most major passages in a lay person's life, such as marriage, were thought to be secular events, in which the monk or nun played little part. Ordination and death, which were held to be within the province of the members of the monastic community, were the only exceptions to this rule.[10]

Monks and nuns in India during the era labeled by scholars as 'Primitive Buddhism,' spent much of their time wandering from place to place, except for the months of the rainy season when they were constrained to spend every night

[9]See Robert C. Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 109 and Hans-Dieter Evers, "The Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon and Thailand: A Comparative Study of Formal Organizations in Two Non-Industrial Societies," Sociologus 18 (1969): 21-22.

[10]See Richard F. Gombrich, introduction to The World of Buddhism, ed. by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 14.

at one monastery.[11] They also spent many hours in solitary meditation. Their lives were deliberately separated from the lives of householders. Members of the *Sangha* were not supposed to concern themselves with social issues, as this would hinder their attempt to renounce earthly things. Although the merit made by the monks and nuns affected the entire Buddhist community, men and women joined the *Sangha* in order to more easily follow the example of the Buddha, not to affect the secular community in any way other than by setting a good example.

A point which is essential to understanding the current organization of the Thai *Sangha*, is the difference in organization between the *sangha* during the 'primitive period', which was loose and informal, and that of the modern Thai *sangha*. In Thailand, the *Sangha* can be called a "monastic-church".[12] The King is given final control over the religion, which is organized in much the same way as the government. The King appoints a Supreme Patriarch who then controls the Governing Monastic Council. This Council governs all affairs concerning the *Sangha* in Thailand. The King also has authority over the Prime Minister, who in turn directs the Ministry of Education and the Department of

[11]The 'primitive period' of Buddhism, from the late sixth century BCE to around 272 to 236 BCE, lasted from the first conversions by the Buddha to the time when Emperor Asoka became the patron of Buddhism in India. It was during this time that the *bhikkuni* order was created. See Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989), 156.

[12]See Patrick G.Henry and Donald K. Swearer, For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 189.

Religious Affairs. The Department of Religious Affairs governs the Regional, Provincial, and District Ecclesiastical Governors who have authority over the abbots of local monasteries. In this way, secular and religious interests are inextricably intertwined, and structures which were originally loosly organized have become institutionalized.[13] In fact, as Robert Lester points out, "the religious-secular dichotomy applied so extensively in Western thought is inappropriate to the Buddhist way in Southeast Asia." The Theravada Buddhist, "thinks of his whole way of life as Buddhist- his individual, family, village, and natural cultural identity is established with reference to Buddhist values.[14]

To get to this point, Buddhism has undergone a gradual process of bureaucratization which began as soon as the *Bhikku Sangha* was formed. The *sangha* moved from a loosely organized community to become what is now in Thailand a hierarchically structured organization. As the authors of For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism note,

> Socially, the egalitarian nature of the early monastic community became more rigid and hierarchical, even, as in the cases of Nepal and Sri Lanka, absorbing caste distinctions. In Thailand, a national monastic organization was created in the nineteenth century, paralleling the

[13]See Henry and Swearer, For the Sake of the World, 190 and Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 100.
[14]Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 3.

political structures of a modernizing, bureaucratic state."[15]

The ordination procedures that monks follow now were codified shortly after the Buddha died. Up to that point the process of ordination was an informal one. The candidate for ordination would approach the Buddha and request ordination by saying, "May I, O Lord, in the presence of the Blessed One, receive the 'Going forth' from home (*pravrajya*), receive ordination (*upasampad*). May I, in the presence of the Blessed One, practice the pure conduct (*brahmacarya*)." The Buddha would answer with this summons, "Come, O monk; the Doctrine has been well expounded; practice pure conduct in order to put a definitive end to suffering."[16]

After the Buddha's death, the senior monks gathered to discuss formalizing ordination procedure. At this time, all Buddhist doctrines were preserved orally. This situation continued for centuries, and it was not until the 1st Century C.E. that the Buddhist canon was written down in its entirety.[17] Therefore, this meeting of senior monks was an important event in the formalizing of the canon. Richard Gombrich's description of the ordination procedures followed today illustrates the stark contrast between modern ordination and the informal ordination performed by the Buddha:

---

[15]Henry and Swearer, For the Sake of the World, 86.
[16]LaMotte, "The Buddha," 54.
[17]See Richard F.Gombrich, "The Evolution of the Sangha," in The World of Buddhism (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 77.

> Ordination is fixed down to the smallest detail by ritual texts called *karmavacana*. It is conferred by a chapter of at least ten monks. Supplied with a begging bowl and three robes, the supplicant requests ordination three times. The celebrant ensures that he is free of impediments and enquires for his name, his age and his preceptor. Then the ordination proper follows: this is an ecclesiastical act in which the 'motion' is fourfold (*jnapticaturthakarman*). It in fact consists of a motion (*jnapti*) followed by three propositions (*karmavacana*) concerning the admission of the motion by the chapter.[18]

This is just one example of the way procedures have rigidified since the time of the Buddha. The codification and canonization of the sayings of the Buddha was a slow process. It took place gradually as senior monks met and discussed the teachings of the Buddha. These meetings came to be called the Buddhist Councils. There have been six Buddhist Councils recognized by Theravadin monks. The first was held in Rajagrha, only months after the Buddha's death. Maha Kasyapa, the most senior monk, presided over the Council. The goal was to establish an oral canon by questioning different monks about sayings attributed to the Buddha.[19]

This oral tradition was eventually written down, which formalized Buddhist doctrine even more. The *Tripitaka* (the three baskets) is the name of the set of books which comprise the Buddhist canon. The three Books of the *Tripitaka* contain Buddhist doctrine, the Buddha's teachings,

[18]LaMotte, "The Buddha," 55.

[19]The *sangha* officially split into the Mahayana and Theravada schools at the third Buddhist Council. See Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 67.

and disciplinary rules, which govern both lay followers and the monastic community. Buddhist tradition claims that these books contain the actual words of the Buddha, but they are in fact the work of many different monks between the time of the Buddha's death and the time the *Tripitaka* was first written down, sometime during the 1st Century C.E.. Therefore, there were approximately 500 to 1000 years in which the doctrines of Gautama Buddha were collected and expanded by the monks. This process of formalizing Buddhist doctrine may account in part for the divergent attitudes towards women contained within Buddhist doctrine, as egalitarian doctrine was combined with the patriarchal attitudes of the monks who controlled what was included in the *Tripitaka*.

It can be argued that the concepts on which Buddhism is based are egalitarian. Any human being has the same ability to follow the Eightfold Path laid down by the Buddha and to seek Enlightenment by renouncing the world and taking refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*. The Brahmin religion, which existed in India at the time of the Buddha's Enlightenment, regarded women as spiritually inferior to men. The code of laws written by Manu, a Brahmin Law-giver, is an example of the lack of respect for women in India at this time. This code of laws prevented women from reading the Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures. A woman could only reach heaven by blind obedience to her husband, regardless of his merit. It also specified that a

woman should be kept under close watch and occupied with motherhood and domestic duties, as these were the only things which would keep her chaste.

Therefore, for the Buddha to proclaim that both men and women could attain Enlightenment was a significant reform of the prevalent attitudes towards women. Some Buddhist scholars have suggested that the Buddha's reforms of the excesses of Brahminism served to reform the status of women in India as well. Diana Paul, in her book Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition states:

> It is not suggested that the Buddha inaugurated a campaign for the liberation of Indian womanhood. But he did succeed in creating a minor stir against Brahmin dogma and superstition. He condemned the caste structure dominated by the brahmin, excessive ritual and sacrifice. He denied the existence of a Godhead and emphasized emancipation by individual effort. The highest spiritual states were within the reach of both men and women and the latter needed no masculine assistance or priestly intermediary to achieve them. We could therefore agree... that Buddhism accorded to women a position approximating to equality.[20]

However, Paul is careful to say that the position of women only 'approximates' equality, and indeed there are portions of the Tripitaka containing doctrines which, if followed to the letter of the law, would preclude true equality between men and women. In a conversation between the Buddha and Ananda, his favorite pupil, recorded in The Book of the

[20]Diana Y. Paul, Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7-8.

Gradual Sayings, the Buddha claims that women are not represented in the court of law or the business world because they are uncontrolled, envious, greedy, and weak in wisdom.[21] Another dialogue between the Buddha and Ananda, illustrates the Buddhist belief that women are the most dangerous temptation for a monk attempting to renounce earthly pleasures.

> [Ananda:] "How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to womankind?"
> [Buddha:} "As not seeing them, Ananda."
> {Ananda:] "But if we should see them, what are we to do?"
> [Buddha:] "Not talking, Ananda."
> [Ananda:] "But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do?"
> [Buddha:] "Keep wide awake, Ananda."[22]

Women are feared for their capacity to arouse lust (*viabhaya*), and the sound of the female voice is considered to be especially harmful to meditation. It is common for women to be associated with the creative force of the earth. While this image can have a positive effect, such as the veneration of the female creative, life-giving force, it comes into direct conflict with the Buddhist ideal of renunciation of all earthly things. When looked at in this light, it becomes easy to see how women can be perceived as impediments to attaining enlightenment.

However, it must be kept in mind that the Buddha preached his original doctrines to men only. As Karma

---

[21] from The Book of the Gradual Sayings, quoted in Parichart Suwanbubbha, A Comparative Study of the Status and Role of Theravada Buddhist and Roman Catholic Nuns (Masters thesis, Mahidol University, 1983), 25.
[22] Paul, Women in Buddhism, 7-8.

Lekshe Tsomo states in the Introduction to Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha, the aim of the Buddha's preaching was to keep monks celibate and free from the earthly attachments which were especially apparent in women's bodies. If the Buddha's audiences had been women, he may have detailed the faults of a male body.[23] The Buddhist attitude towards women as recorded in the Tripitaka is ambivalent, on one hand they can achieve nirvana just as men can, yet they are considered to be clearly associated with bodily desires such as lust. This ambivalence may be attributable both to the long span of time between the origin of Buddhism and the codification of the scriptures and the divergent attitudes of the many monk authors who compiled the finished texts. Therefore it is difficult to claim that the *dharma* is either egalitarian or discriminatory in its view of women. However, one attitude that can be clearly seen in these texts is a fear on the part of monks of allowing women to take positions of authority. In other words, women were not considered innately inferior, as shown by the fact that they could achieve nirvana just as men could. However, women were not in positions of authority, and the monks worked to keep them that way. As Nancy Schuster Barnes states,

> This is the real issue for the status of women in Buddhism I think: it is not that Buddhist monks roundly despised women- they simply wanted to keep

[23]Karma Lekshe Tsomo, introduction to Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 22.

> women out of all positions of authority, in theory and in practice.[24]

The strongest impediments to women being afforded equality within the Buddhist tradition are found in the *Vinaya* laws, the disciplinary codes which govern the conduct of monks and nuns, and establish the authority of the *Bhikku Sangha* over that of the *Bhikkuni Sangha*. When the Buddha agreed to establish the *bhikkuni* order, he did so reluctantly, as is shown by his statement that the reign of the *dhamma*, the true Buddhist teaching, would be cut in half, from 1000 years to 500, by that action. Therefore he drew up eight rules that would safeguard the chastity and authority of the monks. These rules were;

> 1) An almswoman, even if of a hundred years standing, shall make salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before and shall perform all duties towards an almsman, even if just initiated. This is a rule to be revered, reverenced, honoured, and never to be transgressed.
>
> 2) An almsman is not to spend the rainy season of *vassa* in a district in which there is no almsman.
>
> 3) Every half month an almswoman is to await from the chapter of almsmen two things: the asking as to the date of *Upsatha* Ceremony, and the time when the almsmen will come to give the exhortation.
>
> 4) After keeping the rainy season of *vassa* the almswoman is to hold *Pavarana* (an enquiry whether any fault can be laid on her charge) before both the *sanghas*, i.e. that of almsmen and that of almswomen with respect of three matters, namely what has been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected.

[24]Barnes, "Buddhism," 114.

> 5) An almswoman who has been guilty of a serious offense is to undergo the *Monatta* discipline towards both the *Sanghas*.
>
> 6) When an almswoman as novice has been trained for two years in the six rules, she is to ask leave for the *Upasampada* initiation from both the *sanghas*.
>
> 7) An almswoman is in no pretext, to revile or abuse an almsman.
>
> 8) From henceforth, official admonition by a woman of an almsman is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of an almswoman by a man is not forbidden.[25]

These rules specifically establish the *bhikkuni* order as subordinate to the order of monks. Because the order of monks was formed first, the Buddha felt that they should serve as guides and instructors to the newer order of nuns. It is unclear whether these rules were meant to govern relations between the *sanghas* for their duration, or whether they were merely intermediary measures until the order of nuns became firmly established. However, it was the very fact that rules had to be established at all that began the process of constructing a hierarchical structure in the place of a previously egalitarian religion. As Nancy Schuster Barnes points out,

> when the monks' and nuns' orders [samgha] were founded, it was necessary to establish rules to regulate the daily lives of the ascetics; and in the heart of a religion which was free of any doctrines which fostered inequality, a patriarchal structure arose.[26]

---

[25]I. B. Horner, Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), 95.
[26]Barnes, "Buddhism," 106.

The fear of allowing women into the monastic community, evidenced by the Eight Chief Rules, is contradicted in other Buddhist scriptures and sutras. The Buddha is credited with claiming that a country cannot be considered a 'center land', a land which is central in the Buddhist religion, unless all four *sanghas*, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, are fully established in that land.[27] In the Mahaparinaibbanasuttanta, a sutra which is believed to be faithful to the Buddha's words, the Buddha vows, just after his own enlightenment, "to go on living until the *samgha* of monks, nuns, male and female lay disciples had been established and had proven successful." "Success," the Buddha claimed, "would be proved when *all* members of the *samgha* had thoroughly learned the doctrine, were fully practicing the discipline, and were able to teach it all to others."[28]

Another rule that has had a significant affect on the lives of women who wish to become ordained, states that nuns must be ordained by members of both *sanghas*, while a monk can be ordained by monks alone. According to Buddhist tradition, this rule was originally intended to protect women because education and teaching were in the hands of the monks. If new *bhikkunis* were allowed to be ordained by nuns alone, they may not have had access to the teaching

[27]Sakyadhita, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The Opening Speech of His Holiness the Dalai Lama," 41.
[28]Barnes, "Buddhism," 107.

they needed to truly study the *Dhamma*. However, the long term effect of this *Vinaya* law was to justify the consolidation of education in the hands of the monks. It has also served as a justification for the refusal of the Thai Monastic Council to allow women to be ordained as nuns in that country.[29]

[29]Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns," 129.

III. THAILAND

The absence of a *bhikkuni* lineage in Thailand is traceable to at least two phenomena which seem to work together. The first of these, as previously described, is the historical reluctance of Buddhists to allow women the spiritual equality accorded to them in Buddhist doctrine. The eight rules of conduct for nuns, attributed solely to the Buddha in the traditional account, are an example of what Nancy Auer Falk calls, "the Buddhist tradition's inability to affirm completely the idea of women pursuing the renunciant's role".[30] This wariness towards the inclusion of women in the *sangha* contributed to the precariousness of the *bhikkuni* order's existence, which eventually resulted in the disappearance of this order, both in India and in all Theravadin schools of Buddhism. However, the loosely structured nature of 'Primitive Buddhism' provided room for women in religious institutions. It is ironic that the very precariousness of the *bhikkuni* order may have been one of the elements which allowed the female *sangha* to exist. The order's nebulous status created a freedom that was lost as the religion became more hierarchical and the space available for women within the structure became smaller and smaller.

[30]ibid., 156.

The second factor which has contributed to the exclusion of women from the Thai monastic community, is the control of Buddhism by the state, and the subsequent bureaucratization of the religion. The relationship between the bureaucratization of religion and the declining status of women within that religion can be shown in Thailand by a comparison of the status of the Thai *mae chi* with the *meithila-shin* from Burma and the *dasasilmattawa* from Sri Lanka. Burma and Sri Lanka are Theravadin countries whose secular and religious institutions are more clearly separated. As Jane Bunnag notes,

> A distinctive feature of traditional Buddhism in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos is the organization of the *Sangha* as a national institution under state control.... This institutionalization has some important implications for the role and function of the *Sangha* in each of these countries, which may to some extent distinguish the monks of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia from their brothers in Burma and Sri Lanka.[31]

It should be noted that this bureaucratic organization distinguishes Thai women from their Theravadin sisters as well. While the Thai monastic system is highly structured, with a centralized authority figure, the Sinhalese and Burmese monastic systems are constructed quite differently. For example, in Sri Lanka there is no central authority in the *sangha* or clear rules differentiating leadership roles.[32]

---

[31] Jane Bunnag, "The Way of the Monk and the Way of the World: Buddhism in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia," in The World of Buddhism ed. by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 161.

[32] See Evers, "The Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon and Thailand," 27-32.

The *dasasilmattawas* (*dsms*) of Sri Lanka offer an especially interesting contrast to the Thai *mae chis*. As of 1987 there were approximately 2500 *dsms* in Sri Lanka. These women wear the yellow robes of a fully ordained monk or nun, take ten precepts, and most important follow a line of succession, as young women are ordained by established *dsms*. The *dsm* movement began much later than the *mae chis*. The precursors of today's *dsms* lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[33]

The *dsms* offer a fascinating glimpse at how a loose definition of roles can allow women to achieve higher status and opportunity within a somewhat circumscribed position. Women who are ordained as *dsms* define their status as existing somewhere between that of lay women and that of a *bhikkuni*. Some call themselves *samaneri*, or female novices, while some claim they are not members of the *sangha* at all. Yet all agree that they are not lay people. One factor which illuminates the perceived status of *dsms* is their attitudes towards the monks. Many *dsms* believe that they follow a stricter discipline than do urban monks, while still revering forest monks who spend their lives in quiet meditation. As Lowell Bloss notes,

> They [*dsms*] quietly assert that with exceptions, their *sil* [moral purity of their conduct], based on careful observation of the rules, is purer than that of the village or city monks, leading to the

[33]This section draws heavily on Lowell Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka:The *Dasasilmattawa*, The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 10 (1987): 7-31.

> conclusion that they are indeed worthy of the respect often given the monks... As a number of *dsms* remark, it is better to follow 10 rules well, than 227 rules poorly... In criticizing the behavior of village and city monks the *dsms* are echoing the opinion of most laity and they are placing themselves in close relationship with the forest dwelling monks who like the *dsms* stress renunciation of daily life and meditation.[34]

Many *dsms* consider the usefulness of the monks and their relationship with them to be limited to formal events such as initiation. In fact a number of women stated that if ordination as a *bhikkuni* were possible they would not accept it because it would limit their freedom from the monks.[35] This suggests that the uncertainty surrounding the actual status of the *dsm* movement allows these women greater freedom than if their status were clarified and firmly placed in the Buddhist hierarchy. Much like the *bhikkunis* of ancient India, their tenuous existence grants them greater mobility.

Another telling point about the Sri Lankan renunciants is the reaction of the monks to these women. Many monks appear to react with fear and hostility to the flexible nature of the *dsm sangha*. Lowell Bloss characterizes the point of view of the monks in this way:

> Many monks began their assessment of the *dsm* movement by pointing out that the *bhikkus* have no responsibility for the *dsms* since these women do not belong to the *bhikkuni* order . A number went on to say that there is no *bhikkuni* order in Theravada Buddhism, that there cannot be such an order and that the laity are wrong in their acceptance of the *dsms* as *bhikkhunis*. Some

[34]Ibid., 19.
[35]Ibid.

> suggested that in actuality these women were masquerading as part of the *sangha*. In several conversations the initial refusal of the Buddha to ordain women was mentioned, as well as the canonical statement that due to their ordination the *sangha* would not endure as long as it would have if women were not ordained. Lessons that were to be learned from this are that women are physically and mentally weaker than men and cannot endure crisis, and that problems of discipline arise when the sexes are mixed too closely.[36]

The response of the monks illustrates the strong reaction of those in power in the Buddhist hierarchy to the idea of women in positions of authority. The existence of a female *sangha*, respected by the laity, seems to challenge the automatic high status of any man who puts on the monk's robes.[37]

The correlation between bureaucratization and a corresponding decline in the status of women can also be seen in the history of Thai Buddhism. The Thai kingdom of Sukhothai was formed around 1260 CE. This was the first of three recognized Thai kingdoms, the Sukhothai, the Ayudhya, and the current Chakri dynasty. Rama Khamheng, who reigned during the Sukhothai period from 1275 to 1317 CE, established Theravada as the official Thai religion. The succeeding Ayudhya period lasted from 1350 until 1767 CE. During this time, Thai kings were influenced by Khmer culture, and the kingdom's administration was redesigned on a Cambodian model.[38] It is unclear when Thai women began

[36]Ibid., 22.

[37]In Bloss' survey the majority of the laypeople interviewed held the *dsms* in high regard, often higher than those urban monks who were seen as leading too luxurious lives. See ibid., 23-26.

[38]Bunnag, "Buddhism in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia," 159.

wearing white robes, following eight precepts and calling themselves *mae chis*. However, there are records of the existence of *mae chis* as far back as the early Ayudhya period. These records suggest that historically *mae chis* were accorded more respect as religious figures than they are currently.[39] This is supported by the fact that some female members of royal families became *mae chis* during the Ayudhya period. In Thailand today, women who choose the white robes of a *mae chi* are most often from rural families, and have received little or no formal education. They are not considered for ordination and are believed to live off the charity of the monks.[40]

It is clear that the status of ordained women had fallen sharply from the era of 'Primitive Buddhism' to the time when Theravada became the official Thai religion. The organization of the Theravadin Buddhism established in Thailand was borrowed from Sri Lanka. In fact, the Buddhism followed by all of Southeast Asia was codified by the monks of the Ceylonese *Maharihana* (Great Monastery) between 200 BCE and 500 CE.[41] Therefore, although the Buddhist structure became progressively more bureaucratic after its inception in the 13th Century, the religion that followed

[39]Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "Buddhist Nuns in Thailand," in Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 248.
[40]Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "The Future of the *Bhikkhuni Samgha* in Thailand," in Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change, ed. by Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), 152-3.
[41]Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 66.

the Sinhalese model was already more hierarchical than Indian Buddhism.

It was in Sri Lanka that the "small body of religious mendicants, acquainted with each other face-to-face, each seeking his own salvation," became a strictly organized *sangha* that served as the basis for an organized religion. King Asoka brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka, thus laying the ground work for a closer connection between the *sangha* and the ruling class than had existed in Ancient India. In Sri Lanka the *sangha* encountered an agrarian hierarchical society. In order to secure their survival monks chose to own their own farm land and control laborers to work the fields. This was in direct conflict with the Discipline which exhorted monks and nuns not to own land or cause land to be tilled. Michael Carrithers states that, "in other words, far from remaining outside society as renouncers of the world, monks came to stand at the very centre, with the attributes and status of great feudal lords." By the 1200's the *sangha* had become, "a traditional body ruled at the top by a *de facto* hierarchy of family privilege and caste monopoly."[42]

The intertwining of religious and secular institutions in Thailand began early in Thai history. As previously mentioned, a Sukhothai king declared Buddhism the national religion. Many Ayudhya kings involved themselves in

[42]This section draws heavily on Carrithers, "Buddhism in Sri Lanka," 133-146.

religious affairs. King Songdharm (1610-1628) commissioned a royal edition of the *Tripitaka* in order to, "[safeguard] the purity of the canon."[43] Maha Dhammaraja II (1733-1758) sent monks to Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon, to ordain Ceylonese monks. However, it was not until Rama IV, of the reigning Chakri dynasty, who ruled from 1851 until 1868, that a former monk became king. Rama IV began a reform group within Theravadin Buddhism while he was a monk. This reform school was called Dhammayutika-Nikaya, and attempted to follow the proscriptions of the *dhamma* more strictly than the remaining *sangha*, called the Mahanikaya. He also subjected the Mahanikaya *sangha* to a thorough reform after he became king. This established the precedent for direct interference in religious affairs by a secular power, and, as Jane Bunnag notes, set the stage for the intermingling of religious and government policy:

> After that [Rama IV's reform of the *sangha*], state and religion in Thailand became even more closely associated than before, and attempts have been made to justify government policy by Buddhist principles, e.g. when the Supreme Patriarch made an allocution to explain Siam's entry into the First World War in 1917.[44]

The establishment of the Dhammayutika reform *sangha* is also an example of the trend towards more conservative interpretation of doctrine, as the followers of the

[43]Bunnag, "Buddhism in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia," 159.
[44]Ibid., 160.

Dhammayutika school follow a narrower interpretation of the Discipline than the original, "Great School" *sangha*.[45]

It was during the reign of Chulalongkorn the Great, Rama V and the son of King Mongkut (Rama IV), that the Buddhist order Administration Act was enacted. This act formally placed the Buddhist Order under the control of the monarchy and the burgeoning centralized modern state, but made no mention of the women who were living as *mae chis*.[46] Article 15 of the act read, "Every *phikkhu* [*bhikku*] and *saamaneen* [novice monk] must be enlisted in a monastery."[47] This article curtailed the free movement of monks and prevented them from leading individual religious lives. The Buddhist Administration Act also created a system of state examinations which would give monks official status. As Yoneo Ishii states, "this system, which aimed at deepening the monks' knowledge of Buddhism, enforced a sort of orthodoxy by banning free interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines which are liable to bring about schism within the Buddhist order." The system of state examinations combined with mandatory registration of all monks brought about a climate in which, "the Thai monk's understanding of Buddhism

[45]Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 158.
[46]It was during the 43 year long reign of Chulalongkorn that the greatest move towards modernization and bureaucratization of Thailand's administrative organization was made. This paved the way for the bloodless coup of 1932 which ushered in an era of constitutional monarchy. See Yoneo Ishii, "Church and State in Thailand," Asian Survey 8 (1968): 864-871 and Henry and Swearer, For the Sake of the World.
[47]Ishii, "Church and State in Thailand," 866.

became stereotyped, and the monks' subjugation to the state was strengthened."[48]

The present system of monastic organization was first put in place by the Buddhist Order Act of 1941. The structure that was created was very similar to that which exists today, however, due mainly to the democratic regime in power after the coup of 1932, it had a system of checks and balances and accorded less direct power to the Supreme Patriarch. When another coup in 1957 resulted in an authoritarian, military based government, the monastic structure was reorganized and the result was the system which is still in place today. At this time the power of local abbots over monks was strengthened, and the 'Church' was given the power to disrobe monks who did not acknowledge the control or the edicts of the governing body. This brief history of the relationship between the *sangha* and the Thai state shows a gradual consolidation of power in the hands of secular authorities and a decrease in the opportunity for individual monks to live according to their own interpretation of *Dhamma*.

As the lives of the monks became increasingly regulated by secular authorities, the opportunities for women in the *sangha* decreased. Today, the only place open to women in the religious life is that of the *mae chi*, who is not

[48]Ibid.

considered ordained and therefore is not a truly religious figure.

When asked what they think about the lack of opportunity for Thai women to ordain, many Thai people say that it does not matter because women who are interested in a religious life can follow the 311 precepts of a *bhikkuni* on their own.[49] This response seems uncharacteristic from a people who place so much value on hierarchy and status in society, but very common as a rationale for discriminatory practices. A person's status determines how (s)he is treated by other members of society. Status can be determined by such factors as age, wealth, occupation, and sex, but one important factor which is often overlooked is time spent in the monkhood. There are two categories of laymen in Thai society, those who have previously been monks and those who have not. Laymen who have previously been monks enjoy a higher status, because they are seen as a 'bridge' between the lay and monastic worlds.[50]

In a Christian society, people tend to think of the monkhood as a lifelong commitment. Thai Buddhists do not see the *Bhikku Sangha* in this way. There is no stigma attached to leaving the *sangha*, or to becoming a monk for only a short time. Many Thai men enter the *sangha* for only one three month period of the rainy season. In this way a

[49]Based on interviews conducted at the Santi Asoke congregations in Bangkok and Nakorn Pathom in November of 1991.
[50]Lester, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, 131.

man may repay the obligation he owes his family for raising him, by accruing merit for the whole family by living as a monk for even a short period of time. As Robert Lester points out,

> We must remember... that any male, of age, may become a monk thereby taking on the highest possible status without reference to economic or political power; and considering the opportunity for an education and for a transvillage awareness open to a member of a nationally oriented monastic order, the monk may return to lay life with the potential for much higher status than he otherwise would have enjoyed. One's merit-potential is his social-mobility potential.[51]

When viewed in this light, the lack of ordination opportunities for women incurs not only a loss in status but a loss in social mobility. Poor women are denied a socially acceptable way of fulfilling their economic obligation to their parents. Karma Tsomo echoes Robert Lester when she writes, "poverty may also play a role in one's decision [to enter the *sangha*]. In some countries, frankly speaking, ordination is seen as an above average job opportunity."[52] The *sangha* can provide an economic refuge for poor rural families as well, by offering a place for boys to go. Parents can send their sons to serve as novices or *wat* boys in return for food, a place to live, and an education. However, daughters cannot be educated in this way, and therefore may be seen as a financial drain upon the family. Some poor families are forced to sell their daughters to

---

[51]Ibid., 47-48.

[52]Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Ordination as a Buddhist Nun," in Sakyadhita:Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 58.

work in hotels in Bangkok, the capitol city, in order to pay their debts. However, often when these young women get to the city, there are no jobs and they are forced into prostitution.

It might seem that becoming a *mae chi* would provide a way for women to fulfill their economic obligation to their parents, or to receive some education and financial support. However, because *mae chis* are not recognized as ordained religious figures, the official government definition of a *mae chi* is , "a white robed, homeless female lay follower," they are not qualified to receive the benefits of ordination.[53] *Bhikkus* receive their food from lay people living near the *wat*. The acceptance of alms food by the monks is not considered begging because the alms givers receive merit for their action. However, *mae chis* are prohibited from directly receiving alms food because in their case it would be considered begging, which is illegal in Thailand. Therefore, *mae chis* are at the mercy of the monks' charity for their very existence. Although *mae chis* are officially seen as lay followers, they are also banned from some of the benefits of a secular life. Neither *bhikkus* nor *mae chis* are allowed to vote in any Thai election. The justification for this edict is that religious figures should have no interest in affairs of state. However, it is clear that *mae chis* are not

[53]Office of the Prime Minister, quoted in Suwanbubbha, Comparative Study of Buddhist and Christian Nuns, 76.

considered to be religious figures by even a minority of the Thai population. One example of this is that *mae chis* are expected to pay for themselves when using public transportation, while monks are not, as they are prohibited as religious figures to handle money. The status of the Thai *mae chi* illustrates the reluctance of the *Bhikku Sangha* to allow women any authority within the religion. In this case, secular rules and legislation are used to deny women a place originally accorded to them by the Buddha.

Mae chis are also prevented from receiving education at any Buddhist university. Denying women the opportunity for education with the religion affects the status of women both within Buddhism and within the secular world. The Buddhist *Sangha* has historically been oriented towards teaching the words of the Buddha. Sakyamuni transformed the notion of religious men or women from that of the ascetic to that of the teacher. Therefore, those who teach command respect within a Buddhist community. Because the Buddhist *Sangha* has historically been so closely associated with teaching, the *bhikkuni* order is a logical place for women to become educated, and in turn to share that education with laywomen in the community.

In countries like Thailand where there are no nuns, women are disadvantaged in their struggle for education. In Thailand, women have fewer opportunities for education than in surrounding Buddhist countries where women can become nuns. As Karma Lekshe Tsomo points out:

> The prognosis for unprecedented developments in women's Buddhist education [in China, Korea, and Taiwan] are excellent, with nuns taking a position of leadership among women. A strikingly different picture presents itself in Thailand and Sri Lanka, where opportunities for religious education for women are barely existent.... Unless structured systems of religious education are implemented soon, Buddhist women in these countries will remain disadvantaged for several generations hence.[54]

Thai women are also minimally represented in secular education.[55] This causes a cyclic effect in which the standards of women's education drop lower and lower. As one Mahayana *bhikkuni* notes:

> Where there are no educated *bhiksunis* there are no fully qualified women teachers of *Dharma* and no one to take responsibility to give the nuns thorough training. Where there are no highly educated nuns to take the lead, standards of education and training are quite low, and consequently nuns are not taken very seriously. Thus, the opinion prevails that nuns, and women in general, do not have the talent and qualifications necessary for teaching and administration within the religious hierarchy. Under the circumstances, educated women from good families in these countries rarely enter the order.[56]

It can be seen that women's lack of authority in Thai Buddhism has affected them both economically and in their educational opportunities. Both of these factors influence women's social mobility within Thai society.

---

[54]Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Education For Buddhist Women," in Sakyadhita:Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 164.

[55]Between the ages of 6 and 11, males and females are represented relatively equally in school enrollment figures (female 76%, male 80%), but these figures change considerably as students get older. Between the ages of 12 and 17 the statistics are 29% enrollment for females and 39% for males, and by the time women reach college they only comprise 15.8% and 49% of students majoring in law and medicine respectively. See Robin Morgan, ed., Sisterhood is Global (New York: Anchor Books, 1984), 667-68.

[56]Bhiksuni Fampa Tsedroen, "The Significance of the Conference," in Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 50.

In addition to the restrictions preventing women from moving freely in the social structure, women are denied opportunities for sustained spiritual practice. Although the possibility for serious spiritual practice exists outside of ordination, the practitioner needs time, money, and independence. Because Thailand is a relatively poor, agrarian society, the majority of women lack the means to practice outside of the *Sangha*; as they also lack the opportunity to be ordained, serious spiritual practice is denied them. Ordination can provide the tools for women to advance along the spiritual path and escape the endless cycle of rebirth by becoming *arahats* (fully enlightened ones). Although opportunity for spiritual growth is harder to measure than that of education or social mobility, its absence can affect women's lives profoundly. Women comprise the majority of Buddhist lay followers. However, a woman who fervently wishes to follow the *Dhamma* is denied the traditional path in which to do so.

IV. RESPONSES

If one assumes that Thai women, although disadvantaged in certain ways, are not merely passive victims of a patriarchal structure, but act as agents in their quest for spiritual fulfillment, it follows that the state of Buddhism in Thailand today must engender some kind of organized and individual response from women within that culture. My research and personal experience have suggested that women are reacting to this situation in a variety of ways. In recent years, Asian scholars, nuns, and feminists have become increasingly vocal in their attempts to refute misogynist content in Buddhist texts. Examples of inequalities in the Buddhist Scriptures include passages that claim women cannot be *bodhisatvas* (beings on the path to Buddha hood), and which entreat women to lead a virtuous life in order that they may be born as a man in the next life. Those who would challenge these conceptions point out that the audience for the original doctrines was almost exclusively male and that the Buddha's message was aimed at keeping monks celibate and free from the attachments of women's bodies in order to renounce worldly things which cause suffering and lead to rebirth.

The argument by Karma Tsomo, detailed earlier in the paper, that if the audience for those speeches had been female, the Buddha may have detailed the faults of the male body, is an example of one way in which women challenge

these doctrines.[57] She goes on to argue that, as seems to have happened often in the development of the Buddhist religion, these passages arose not from a belief that women were innately inferior, but from an attempt to describe the dangers of earthly attachments to monks. I would add that those prohibitions may also have arisen from an attempt by monk recorders of the *Dhamma* to solidify unequal power relations within the *Sangha*. It must be remembered that about five centuries passed between the time of the Buddha's death and the first written version of the Buddhist canon in its entirety. Because of this gap, it is difficult to tell which parts of the scriptures were actual sermons of the Buddha, and which were later additions and interpolations.

Women are also attempting to change the belief that another *bhikkuni* is necessary to ordain a Theravadin nun. They have argued against this in many ways, for example, by pointing out that existing *Sanghas* do not always follow other *Vinaya* laws to the letter. An example of this is the law governing confession of faults by both *Sanghas* on a bi-weekly basis. This ceremony is prescribed in the *Tripitaka*, but some temples simply do not follow this rule, while others hold a greatly abbreviated ceremony. However, as Karma Tsomo points out, the *Bhikku Sangha* is not declared illegitimate because of these irregularities:

> While each tradition may do its best to observe the instructions of the *Vinaya*, lapses and

[57] Tsomo, introduction to Sakyadhita, 22.

> irregularities do occur in actual practice. If flaws in the observance of procedures are not cited to discount, much less invalidate, the *bhiksu* lineage, neither should variations in procedure serve as grounds to invalidate the *bhiksuni* lineage. Not only would this be illogical, but in the modern age it which we live, it would be seen as an example of sexual discrimination.[58]

If Theravadin Buddhists accepted this logic, women could be ordained by a group of monks until there were enough *bhikkunis* to fulfill the *Vinaya* law.

To persuade others to accept this viewpoint, women have looked for examples in the canon to serve as precedents for allowing a group of monks to ordain a *bhikkuni*. In the *Cullavagga X* of the Pali canon accepted by Theravada Buddhism, there is a passage in which the Buddha seems to allow this practice: "Then the Lord on this occasion, having given reasoned talk, addressed the monks saying, 'I allow, monks, nuns to be ordained by monks'."[59] There is also a record of a teacher of Theravada *Dhamma* in the fourth century, Gunavarman of Kashmir, who advocated ordination of nuns by monks explicitly.

> At places where the conditions are complete, one must do things according to prescriptions. It is an offense if *bhiksunis* do not receive their full ordination from both preceptor and preceptress at a place where the *Bhiksuni Sangha* exists.... [However] if the two orders of the *Sangha* are not found in one country at the same time, female applicants might receive their full ordination from the order of *bhiksus* alone and it would be considered legitimate.[60]

---

[58]Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Prospects for an International *Bhiksuni Sangha*," in Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha, ed. by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1988), 249-50.
[59]Ibid., 248.
[60]Ibid.

These passages can be used to make persuasive claims for the establishment of a *Bhikkuni Sangha* in Thailand. These sections of text do not prove conclusively that the Buddha would have supported such an establishment, but they create a space for an alternate reading of the canon. It would be hard to show that this interpretation has more validity than the one which would bar women from becoming ordained. However, eliminating the possibility that there in only one way to view the Pali texts creates the opportunity for a dialogue on an issue that many Theravadin Buddhists, both women and men, have refused to take seriously. It lends credence to the assertion that although the Buddha did legislate the *Vinaya* rule stating nuns should be ordained by members of both *Sanghas*, it was originally intended to protect the nuns' right to receive education, and not to stand in the way of establishing a *Bhikkuni Sangha* in a Buddhist country.

Although the *mae chi* is not honored in the Thai culture, some women are using this position as a way to follow the religious practice in which they believe. *Mae Chi* Pratin Kwan On, whom I interviewed at Wat Buvorn in Bangkok, is one such woman. At the time of the interview, *Mae Chi* Pratin had been a *mae chi* for 29 years, and she plans to be one all her life. She is not pleased with the status *mae chis* receive in Thailand, as they have little opportunity for education and are treated poorly by the monks. However, she does not feel it would be possible to

reinstitute the *Bhikkuni* order. When *Mae Chi* Pratin is at Wat Buvorn her main duties include cooking for the monks and working in an office. However, she does not spend all of her time in Bangkok. For much of the year she lives in a *sam nak chi* in Ratchaburi Province. *Sam nak chis* are the only places where groups of *mae chis* can live semi autonomously, under the rule of the abbot of the nearest or a related *wat*. *Mae Chi* Pratin lives with 58 other *mae chis*. They run a school for girls from thirteen to fifteen years of age, called *Dhamma Ja Ritni*. The girls who attend the school need special attention either because they did not complete public school or they came from a broken home.

Mae Chi Pratin's school is an example of the way Thai women work within and subvert existing structures to try to better their lives. *Mae Chi* Pratin really wanted to study at a school for *mae chis* or at a Buddhist University. However, there are no schools for *mae chis* in Thailand and women are not allowed to study at the Buddhist Universities. So she tries to educate young girls through *Dhamma Ja Ritni* and sometimes by talking in secondary schools in Bangkok. She told me that the status of Thai women is not equal to men because, "even though a woman might have ability, the man will always come first." *Mae Chi* Pratin's response to the status of women and the status of the *mae chi* is to try

to study on her own, act with personal strength, and try to set an example of what women can do in society.[61]

In fact, many Buddhist women believe they can transform Buddhism from within, because, although not egalitarian in practice, it is founded on the belief that all persons have the same ability to achieve *nirvana* by following the path laid down by the Buddha. This conviction challenges some of the beliefs of Western feminists. In their analysis of how to respond to the status of women in Theravada Buddhism, Western and Asian women approach feminism in different ways because of different experiences and acculturation processes. Many Western women who are interested in this issue urge Asian women to change *Vinaya* rules or to disregard them altogether, or to press ahead on their own without trying to convince the *Bhikku Sangha* of the importance of a Thai *Bhikkuni Sangha*. However, most Asian women are reluctant to move that quickly because they feel the Buddhist tradition is a long and venerable one, and that the Buddha did lay down rules for including women in the Buddhist religion. They feel there is room to maneuver within the religion, and that many barriers arise out of ignorance and mis-understanding on the part of Buddhist practitioners. One example of this is the fact that most Thai Buddhists do not know that Buddhist nuns exist in other countries, and that they follow the same *Vinaya* rules as the

[61] I spoke with *Mae Chi* Pratin and other *mae chis* at Wat Buvorn in the Bang Lampu district of Bangkok on November 27th, 1991.

Theravada tradition. Many Asian writers state the only way a female *Sangha* can be successfully established is if women work within existing institutions and structures, the importance of which Western women may not understand.[62]

Buddhist nuns from all over the world met in Bodhgaya, India in February of 1987 at the First International Conference on Buddhist Nuns. Participants included Thai *mae chis* as well as renunciants from Sri Lanka and Burma. One of the results of the conference was the creation of Sakyadhita, Worldwide Buddhist Women. The women at the conference drew up a charter for Sakyadhita which resolved, among other things, to work in harmony with all Buddhist *Sanghas*, traditions and communities, to encourage the improvement of Buddhist practice and education for nuns and lay-women, to educate and train women as teachers of Buddha *Dharma*, to establish an international *Bhikkuni Sangha* organization, to introduce the *Sramanerika, Siksamani*, and *Bhikkuni* ordination where they currently do not exist, and to provide help and assistance to Buddhist nuns and those who wish to ordain.[63]

This charter emphasizes the determination of Asian women to work within, or at least to work with existing

---

[62]See Diana L. Eck; Devaki Jain, eds., Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion, and Social Change (Philadelphia: New Society, 1987); Rita M. Gross, "Buddhism After Patriarchy?" in After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions, ed. by Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); Elizabeth Harris, "A Conference on Buddhist Nuns," Dialogue (Colombo)17 (1990): 107-112; and Tsomo, "Prospects for an International *Bhiksuni Sangha*," .

[63]Harris, "A Conference on Buddhist Nuns," 111-112.

structures and to attempt to avoid alienating Buddhist monks. As one participant at the conference observed,

> A danger which arose before the Conference finished was that the mood would be misunderstood and misrepresented by the press; that it would be seen as a forum for a militant feminism demanding equality with the *Bhikkhu Sangha*- an emphasis which could greatly damage the situation of nuns in some countries. Although the reinstatement of the *bhikkuni* ordination was an urgent issue for some women there, the mood was certainly not militant. There was a sincere wish to work with *bhikkus*, to move slowly, to respect the traditions built up over 2,500 years and to base any pressing for change on thorough research.[64]

However, women at the conference had obviously analyzed the status of women's opportunities for education and practice, and found them wanting.

Another important resolution urged the introduction of the *Sramanerika, Siksamani,* and *Bhikkhuni* ordination where they do not now exist. The *Siksamani* ordination, also called *Siksamana or Sikaamaat,* involves taking ten precepts. When a woman took the *Siksamani* ordination during the time of the Buddha she was considered a probationary nun for two years until she took the final *Bhikkuni* ordination. At this time there are 21 *Siksamani* (called *Sikaamaat*) in Thailand. They are all members of a Buddhist reform movement called *Santi Asoke,* founded by a man named *Phra* Bodhirak, whose members concentrate on upholding the precepts and living a simple and virtuous life which stresses the value of work for itself not for what it produces. Full time members live

[64]Ibid., 110.

in one of four *Santi Asoke* centers located in different areas of Thailand. I spent time at the *Asoke* congregations in both Bangkok and the southern province of Nakorn Pathom.

The process of becoming a *sikaamaat* can take a long time. One woman I spoke to, *Sikaamaat* Nua Nim, has been a member of Santi Asoke for 12 years but had only completed the ordination process six months before our conversation. There are six steps to the process.

1. *Athantukojahn*: a person who has visited *Santi Asoke* at least seven times and participates, but does not live there.

2. *Akhantukapajaam*: a woman who lives at the center. She can leave whenever she wants; but seldom does.

3. *Aramika*: a woman who can only leave the center if it is absolutely necessary.

4. *Bat*: a woman who wears a white shirt and brown *pasin* (traditional Thai skirt). She serves and studies with the ordained *sikaamaats*.

5. *Graak*: a woman who shaves her hair and adds a brown *sabai* (sash) to the outfit of the *bat*.

6. *Sikaamaat*: a woman who shaves her hair, wears brown robes and a gray *sabai*, never leaves the center except to teach others about Buddhism, and pledges to follow the ten precepts.

An indication of the heightened respect for *sikaamaat* in the *Santi Asoke* movement is that all ordained women are greeted with a *kraab*. The *kraab* is a gesture of respect, usually paid only to monks, which consists of the layperson getting on her knees, putting her hands to her forehead in a traditional greeting (*wai*), and then bowing down until her elbows and palms of the hands touch the ground. Traditional

Buddhists perform this act only for monks and novices, as *mae chis* are not even at the rank of a novice.

It would seem that members of *Santi Asoke* have come up with a logical compromise between those who deny the possibility of there ever being a *Bhikkuni Sangha* in Thailand and people who wish to see an improvement in women's status in the religion. Because monks alone were allowed to ordain women as *Sikaamaats* during ancient Indian Buddhism, there is a precedent for Thai women to take this ordination. However, the Thai Monastic Council refuses to acknowledge any of the full time members of *Santi Asoke* as being legitimately ordained. In addition, in July of 1989, the Bangkok Public Prosecutor filed 113 charges in a criminal court case against the leader of *Santi Asoke*, *Phra* Bodhirak, and his followers. Although the main charge is that *Phra* Bodhirak had claimed to have achieved enlightenment and therefore to have breached Buddhist discipline, some of the charges indicate disapproval of the *sikaamaats*.[65]

This discomfort seems to arise from the fact that women ordained as *sikaamaats* accompany the monks on their daily

[65]*Phra* is an honorific title for a monk. *Phra* Bodhirak was ordained in both the Dhammayut and Mahanikai sects before he became disenchanted with what he saw as the corruption of traditional Buddhism and broke away to found his own movement. The charge against *Phra* Bodhirak reads, "during the time that the Accused has been ordained under Buddhism, the Accused has regularly violated the Buddhist discipline by claiming *Uttarimanussadhammo* (a condition above that of human), that he was the incarnation of *Phra* Daribut, right hand chief disciple of the Lord Buddha and that he had become enlightened at *Satapannp* and *Sakadagomi* level or had become enlightened to the knowledge, knowing everything by himself, past, present and future." Aporn Poompanna, Insight Into Santi Asoke II (Bangkok: Dhamma Santi, 1991), 46.

alms rounds. This is in fact the reason members of *Santi Asoke* give for allowing women to take the ten precepts of a *sikaamaat*. *Phra* Bodhirak believes that allowing monks to handle money has greatly contributed to the disintegration of traditional Buddhist values. Therefore no ordained person in *Santi Asoke* is allowed to use currency, which makes the tenth precept, (abstain from possessing money or other things that people value and desire) necessary for *sikaamaats* to support themselves by collecting alms food.

Mae chis are not allowed to participate in gathering alms, contributing to the popular conception that they are dependent on the charity of monks. The visibility of ordained women in *Santi Asoke* may lead both to a uneasiness on the part of the larger Thai society and to a higher status within their own movement. The right to obtain food by going on alms rounds is one thing which will be denied to ordained *Santi Asoke* members if they are found guilty in court of the charges levied against them. I asked one woman, *Sikaamaat* Chinda, what she would do if this were to happen. "We will die," she said. "We are forbidden to handle money, and without the alms food we will starve. Maybe some people will remember us and bring us food here, but it will not be enough."[66] If *Santi Asoke* members are found guilty they will be ordered to defrock, and alms rounds will be considered illegal begging.

[66]The author's conversations with *Sikaamaats* Chinda and Nua Nim took place at the *Santi Asoke* congregation in Bang Kapi, outside of Bangkok, on November 13th 1991.

The women who enter *Santi Asoke* do not do so out of a desire to better the position of Buddhist women, but out of a belief in the words of *Phra* Bodhirak. However, their ordination as *sikaamaats* illustrates both the possibility for an improved status for female renunciants and the fear which any steps towards this goal engender in the wider Buddhist community.

There is at least one Thai woman who is directly challenging the idea that Theravadin women cannot ordain as *bhikkhunis*. *Bhikkhuni* Voramai Kabilsingh became a *mae chi* at *Wat Buvorn* in Bangkok in 1956. In 1971 she traveled to Taiwan, a Mahayana Buddhist country, and took the *bhikkuni* ordination. She returned to Thailand and established a temple in the southern province of Nakorn Pathom, called *Wat Songdhamma-kalyani* (Women Who Uphold *Dhamma*).[67] She maintains that because Chinese nuns were ordained by Theravadin nuns from Ceylon in the fifth century, even though these nuns follow the Mahayanan tradition, they represent an unbroken lineage back to Indian *bhikkhunis*. Therefore they can legitimately ordain Theravadin *bhikkhunis*. Thai monks do not recognize *Bhikkhuni* Kabilsingh as a legitimate nun. Although there is historical evidence to support Kabilsingh's assertion, the Monastic Council of Thailand does not accept Chinese or Taiwanese nuns as true descendants of Indian nuns.

[67]Kabilsingh, "The Future of the *Bhikkhuni Samgha* in Thailand," 158-59.

Bhikkhuni Kabilsingh's experience is both an empowering example of one woman challenging discriminatory practices from within the religious structure, and an illuminating look at the patriarchal ideals behind the Monastic Council's refusal to acknowledge her as a fully ordained nun. The explanations given for why women cannot be ordained in Thailand originate from highly subjective interpretations of texts which can also be read in very different ways. Buddhist scholars have shown that there is no substantive difference between Theravada and Mahayana *Vinaya* rules, and that the ordination lineage of Chinese *bhikkhunis* dates back to the order created by the Buddha. Therefore, the *Dhamma* contains nothing prohibiting Theravada women from receiving ordination from Chinese or Taiwanese nuns. The refusal of Thai Buddhists to legitimate *Bhikkhuni* Voramai is a product of a conservative, patriarchal ideology held by the society at large, not of the laws of the Buddhist religion.

V. CONCLUSION

One of the hardest tasks in writing this paper was to convey the very real way Thai women are impacted by the lack of religious opportunity and role models. It is relatively easy to talk about how women may be affected economically or have their social mobility curtailed, yet it is difficult to discuss what may be most important, how individual women are denied personal spiritual fulfillment. When I learned that women are not allowed to become *bhikkhunis* in Thailand today, my first response was to look around for alternate ways that groups of women have been able to achieve that spiritual need. One logical place to look seemed to be to the women who take the white robes of the *mae chis*. However, these women are not perceived as spiritual figures and may in fact encounter more impediments to religious practice than lay people, due to a lack of resources and education. Therefore, except for those few women who ordain as *sikaamaats*, Thai women must follow a solitary path if they wish to uphold more than the five precepts of the Buddhist *upasika*.

The obvious solution to a Western observer may be to work to immediately reinstate the *bhikkuni* ordination. However, the situation becomes more complex when one examines the pleas by many Asian feminists and Buddhists to move slowly so as not to alienate *bhikkus* and other lay Buddhists. It is imperative to view this issue within the

framework placed upon it by long held traditions and customs that at first glance may seem alien or unimportant to a Western scholar. It is also necessary to acknowledge the efforts that are underway to somehow better women's status within Thai Buddhism. If one accepts that the recreation of the order of nuns is the only goal, then it becomes harder to validate the persistence of women who are working to make change in their religion in so many ways.

It is also important to note that Theravadin women are not alone in their struggle. Women all over the world are protesting, leading, and speaking out against the patriarchal structures created of or by the major religions. It is naive to claim that women are not discriminated against in religion. Yet it also cannot be ignored that women are not merely passive victims of that discrimination, but are acting out in many ways, both within and without established religions, to ensure that someday all men and women can have equal opportunity to explore their own spirituality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnes, Nancy Schuster. "Buddhism." In Women in World Religions, ed. Arvind Sharma , 105-133. New York: SUNY Press, 1987.

Bechert, Heinz and Richard Gombrich, eds. The World of Budhhism. London: Thames & Hudson, 1984.

Bhagvat, Durga N. Early Buddhist Jurisprudence (Theravada Vinaya-Laws). New Dehli: Genesis, 1910.

Bloss, Lowell. "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: The *Dasasilmattawa*." The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 10 (1987): 7-31.

Brock, Rita Nakashima. "Asian Women Theologians Respond to American Feminism." Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 3 (Fall 1987): 103-134.

Brock, Rita Nakashima; Paula Cooey and Anne Klein, eds. "The Questions That Won't Go Away: A Dialogue About Women in Buddhism and Christianity." Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 6 (Fall 1990): 87-120.

Bunnag, Jane. "The Way of the Monk and the Way of the World: Buddhism in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia." In The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, 159-171. London: Thames & Hudson, 1984.

Carrithers, Michael B. "'They Will be Lords Upon the Island': Buddhism in Sri Lanka." In The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, 133-146. London: Thames & Hudson, 1984.

Dewaraja, L.S. The Position of Women in Buddhism. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981.

Dhirasekara, Jothiya. "Women and the Religious Order of the Buddha." Maha Bodhi 75 (1967): 154-161.

Eck, Diana, and Devaki Jain, eds. Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change. Philadelphia: New Society, 1987.

Evers, Hans-Dieter. "The Buddhist Sangha in Ceylon and Thailand: A Comparative Study of Formal Organizations in Two Non-Industrial Societies." Sociologus, 18 (1969): 20-35.

Falk, Nancy Auer. "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism." In Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, 155-165. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989.

Gombrich, Richard F. Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.

Gross, Rita. "Buddhism After Patriarchy?" In After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions, ed. Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, 65-86. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.

--------. "Buddhism and Feminism: Toward Their Mutual Transformation." The Eastern Buddhist Society 19 (Spring & Autumn 1981): 44-58.

Harris, Elizabeth. "A Conference on Buddhist Nuns." Dialogue (Colombo) 17 (1990): 107-112.

Henry, Patrick G. and Donald K. Swearer. For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989.

Horner, I.B. Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1930.

Ishii, Yoneo. "Church and State in Thailand." Asian Survey 8 (1968): 864-871.

Jumsai, M.L. Manich. Understanding Thai Buddhism. Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1973.

Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn. "The Future of the Bikkhuni Samgha in Thailand." In Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change, ed. Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain, 148-158. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987.

Kvaerne, Per. "Tibet: the Ride and Fall of a Monastic Tradition." In The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, 253-271. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

LaMotte, Etienne. "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha." In The World of Buddhism, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, 41-59. London: Thames & Hudson, 1984.

Lester, Robert C. Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan, 1973.

Lewis, Nantawan Boonprasat. "Asian Women Theology: A Historical and Theological Analysis." East Asian Journal 4 (Oct. 1986): 18-22

Morgan, Robin, ed. Sisterhood is Global. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.